

Austere Realism

Contextual Semantics Meets Minimal Ontology

Terry Horgan and Matjaž Potrč

**A Bradford Book
The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England**

© 2008 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher.

MIT Press books may be purchased at special quantity discounts for business or sales promotional use. For information, please e-mail special_sales@mitpress.mit.edu or write to Special Sales Department, The MIT Press, 55 Hayward Street, Cambridge, MA 02142.

This book was set in Stone Serif and Stone Sans on 3B2 by Asco Typesetters, Hong Kong, and was printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Horgan, Terry, 1948–.

Austere realism : contextual semantics meets minimal ontology / Terence E. Horgan and Matjaž Potrč.

p. cm.—(Representation and mind series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-262-08376-8 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Ontology. 2. Realism. 3. Semantics. I. Potrč, Matjaž. II. Title.

BD311.H67 2007

149'.2—dc22

2007032259

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

We now turn to the position that presents itself as being straightforwardly opposed to the claims of austere realism, namely the position naively adopted by common sense in respect to what there is and what constitutes truth. As the dialectic of commonsense metaphysical realism later unfolds, it will become clear that ultimately there is no strong tension between austere realism and reflective common sense. But at the very beginning of discussion, such an opposition looks quite natural. The reflective mode will then lead toward refinement in commonsense thinking about ontology and truth, as common sense comes into tension with itself (the antithesis stage) and then overcomes this internal tension (the synthesis stage). But at the beginning stage, when common sense reflects naively on matters of ontology and semantics, it arrives at a position sharply at odds with austere realism—the position we are here calling simple commonsense metaphysical realism.

This chapter will initiate the dialectical progression by spelling out the ontological and semantic theses of simple realism, and by underscoring the incompatibility between these theses and austere realism.

1.1 The Ontological and Semantic Theses of Simple Realism

When common sense goes reflective about truth and ontology, how does it construe its own ontological commitments? What does common sense believe to be really there? How does it conceive of truth and its connection to ontology? It initially arrives at a naive view about these matters. The term ‘naive’ captures the fact that this position is common sense’s *initial* position, at the beginning of ontological inquiry. This term also indicates that

there is more to come: the naive position is only the first stage of what will evolve into a three-stage dialectic, as commonsense reflective investigation into ontology and truth progresses. Here then are the ontological and semantic theses of simple realism.

Ontological Theses

O1. *Metaphysical realism*: There is a mind-independent, discourse-independent world.

O2. *Naive commonsense ontology*: The right ontology includes many of the posits of everyday belief and discourse and many of the posits of mature scientific theories. Also, when there are multiple items falling under a given posit-kind, such multiplicities conform well to the counting practices that are routinely employed for that posit-kind.

Semantic Theses

S1. *Correspondence conception of truth*: Truth is correspondence between language and thought on one hand, and the world on the other.

S2. *Abundance of truth*: Numerous statements and thought-contents involving posits of common sense and science are true—including numerous counting-statements about such posits.

S3. *Naive construal of correspondence*: Truth is a direct mapping between thought/language and the world.

S4. *Naive construal of ontological commitment*: Commonsense beliefs and statements are ontologically committed to their posits.

Common sense is deeply committed to a world that exists independently apart from how it is conceived or described by humans or other thinking creatures; this is *metaphysical realism*, thesis O1. Common sense is also deeply committed to two ideas about truth. First is the idea that a thought or statement is true just in case it *corresponds* to the world; this is the correspondence conception of truth, thesis S1. Second is the idea that numerous beliefs and statements that are normally thought to be true, in everyday thought and discourse and also in science, really *are* true (including numerous beliefs and statements about how many objects of a given kind there are at, or within, a given location or within a given region); this is semantic thesis S2. These three deeply held beliefs will remain in place as the reflective dialectic of common sense progresses through its successive three stages.

Semantic thesis S3, which construes truth as a *direct* form of correspondence between thought/language and the world, is typically elaborated along the following lines (with the formal language of predicate logic as a model). A logically atomic thought/statement is true just in case (1) there are objects o_1, \dots, o_n in the correct ontology that are respectively denoted by the respective singular constituents of the thought/statement, (2) there is a monadic or polyadic relation R in the correct ontology that is expressed by the predicative constituent of the thought/statement, and (3) R is jointly instantiated by o_1, \dots, o_n (in that order). Likewise, the thought/statement is false just in case (1) there are objects o_1, \dots, o_n in the correct ontology that are respectively denoted by the respective singular constituents of the thought/statement, (2) there is a monadic or polyadic relation R in the correct ontology that is expressed by the predicative constituent of the thought/statement, and (3) R is *not* jointly instantiated by o_1, \dots, o_n (in that order). A nonatomic thought/statement is true (or false), roughly, just in case (1) it is true (or false) according to a Tarski-style recursive characterization of the truth predicate, and (2) it meets condition (1) solely by virtue of the truth or falsity of certain logically simpler thought-contents or statements that either (a) are constituents of the original nonatomic thought/statement, or (b) are obtainable from such constituents by instantiating singular constituents for quantified-variable constituents.

Semantic thesis S4, pertaining to ontological commitment, fits naturally with S3. Since the truth of a thought/statement requires that the correct ontology includes the thought/statement's posits (and that these posits instantiate the properties and relations predicated of them by the thought/statement), beliefs and statements are thereby ontologically committed to their posits.

The second ontological thesis of simple realism, O2, spells out common sense's naive belief about what should be embraced by an appropriate ontology. Thesis O2 fits hand-and-glove, within naive commonsensical reflection, with the semantic theses S2–S4. For, thesis S3 says in effect that the correspondence that constitutes truth involves direct referential linkages between the positing/counting apparatus of language/thought on one hand (e.g., names, predicates, and quantifiers) and individuals and properties on the other hand. This means that in order for a thought or statement to be true, there must be items in the mind-independent, discourse-independent world (viz., individuals and properties) that directly answer

to the thought/statement's constituent positing apparatus. Thus, the thought/statement is ontologically committed to its posits—thesis S4. So, when one naively reflects commonsensically about matters of ontology, taking one's commonsense beliefs and the well-confirmed claims of contemporary science as largely true (thesis S2), one initially concludes that the right ontology—whatever exactly it is—must include many of the posits of everyday belief and discourse plus many of the posits of mature scientific theories—and must include multiplicities of them that conform to routine counting practices. This is thesis O2.

1.2 Ontological Vagueness

When common sense initially dwells upon certain questions pertaining to the nature of its posits, it arrives at the verdict that these questions have no determinate answer. For instance, there are questions of synchronic composition: Which particles of matter are literally *parts* of some posited item (e.g., a living human being, or a building, or an automobile, etc.), and which particles of matter are merely inside it without literally being parts of it? When you sip a cup of coffee or inhale a breath of air, are those recently internalized coffee molecules and air molecules immediately parts of your body, or are they merely inside of it? If the latter, then at what point during the processes of metabolization do these molecules, and/or their own proper parts, become parts of your body? The commonsensical response is that *there is no precise fact of the matter* about such questions.

Certain questions about spatiotemporal boundaries evince the same commonsensical reaction. Consider an acorn that falls to the ground, germinates, and gradually grows into an oak tree. At what point during the growth process does the tree itself begin to exist? The commonsensical response is that the tree *has no precise initial temporal boundary*; rather, it comes into being gradually. At what point in time did *you yourself* come into being, during the process that commenced when sperm met egg in your mother's womb? The commonsensical answer is the same as in the case of the acorn and oak tree.

Analogous observations hold for virtually all the posits of both ordinary thought/discourse and of science. Thus, the initial commonsensical view is that all such posits are *vague* items—vague with respect to their synchronic composition, for instance, and also vague with respect to their spatiotem-

poral boundaries. (Common sense surely regards them as vague in other respects too—e.g., vague with respect to how an object's parts could change, or be rearranged, or be replaced, without the object itself ceasing to exist.)

The initial commonsensical view about ordinary posits, then, is that they are *vague* items. The vagueness in question does not reside in language or in thought, but rather in the items themselves. Thus naive common sense conceives its posits as *ontologically vague*—mind-independently real items about which there is no precise fact of the matter concerning their composition, their boundaries, or their capacity for persistence through change.

A way to make vivid simple realism's commitment to the ontological vagueness of its posits is to ask how common sense initially reacts to questions that pose versions of what Peter Unger (1980) called *the problem of the many*. Suppose for the moment that there are various ontologically precise objects, all of which are good candidates for being identical with Mount Whitney—say, precise mereological sums of matter that differ from one another only very slightly. The slight differences involve matters like precise spatiotemporal boundaries and precise synchronic composition. (For present purposes, it doesn't really matter whether or not these mereological sums are *totally* precise. They might be individuated via their composite molecules, for instance, and yet the spatiotemporal boundaries of a single molecule might remain somewhat vague or indeterminate.) Is one and only one of these objects the unique referent of the name 'Mount Whitney', and if so, then which one?

When common sense initially considers this question, it seems immediately obvious that if indeed there are all these precise objects, then no specific one of them qualifies as the unique referent of 'Mount Whitney'. For, there are numerous equally well-qualified candidates (perhaps *infinitely* many such candidates); nothing about the world itself could make it the case of any one of these candidates that it, and not any of its competitors, is Mount Whitney. Yet, common sense does not conclude from this that there is no such unique object as Mount Whitney, or that there are vastly many mountains (perhaps infinitely many) in the local vicinity of the erstwhile Mount Whitney. Rather, the initial commonsensical view is that there is just one Mount Whitney, and that *none* of these precise objects is identical to it. The real Mount Whitney is a vague object rather than being any one (or more than one) of these precise objects.

This commonsensical way of reacting to the problem of the many reveals the importance of incorporating commonsensical ways of *counting* into the formulation of simple realism. Hence the second part of the ontological thesis O2, asserting that multiplicities falling under a given posit-kind conform to the counting practices that are routinely employed for that kind. And hence too the second part of the semantic thesis S2, asserting that among the many posit-involving truths are numerous counting-statements involving the posits.

1.3 Scientific Posits

We take it that when common sense initially dwells upon matters of ontology, it considers theoretical science to be ontologically committed to its posits too. The semantic theses of simple realism apply to scientific claims, and not just to claims made in nonscientific terminology. So simple realism is also metaphysically realist about the theoretical posits of mature science—electrons, quarks, cells, quasars, black holes, and so forth.

There are those, we realize, who are metaphysical realists about various observable entities posited by prescientific common sense (e.g., middle-sized dry goods) but are metaphysical irrealists (or metaphysical agnostics) about unobservable theoretical entities posited by science. (See, e.g., van Fraassen 1980.) Such a metaphysical position, however, is not the one that common sense itself comes to when it initially goes reflective about ontology, since such a position is contrary to *simple* realism. Simple realism supposes that the claims of mature science are largely true, and thus asserts that the posits of mature science are real—are items in the correct ontology. Although atoms and quarks are not directly observable, they are no less real than things that are observable, such as middle-sized dry goods. Naïve common sense says, “Observable things are obviously real, and so their unobservable microparts must be real as well.”

There are also those, we realize, who are metaphysical realists about entities posited in mature scientific theories, but who are irrealists about certain posits of nonscientific thought and discourse—for example, about “socially constructed” entities like nations and corporations. There is something plausible about this line of thought, especially insofar as it is directed toward posits of everyday discourse that are not directly observable in the manner of middle-sized dry goods and whose putative existence is sup-

posedly a matter of institutional decree (e.g., legal or contractual decree). We will address this plausible side of that position further below. But once again, such a position is contrary to the *naïve* commonsense view—namely, simple realism—because it apparently requires some backing away from the semantical theses of simple realism in order to somehow accommodate ordinary claims about nations, corporations, and the like while eschewing genuine ontological commitment to such posits. Simple realism cleaves to the naïve construal of correspondence, which considers truth as a direct kind of mapping between language or thought and the world. Simple realism also embraces the naïve construal of ontological commitment, which applies to corporations and nations no less than to middle-sized dry goods.

1.4 The Conflicts between Austere Realism and Simple Realism

Simple realism clearly conflicts strongly with austere realism (and hence with blobjectivism), about both matters ontological and matters semantic. On the ontological side, there is no conflict concerning the first ontological thesis of simple realism, which is also a part of the austere realist position. But the second ontological thesis of austere realism clearly is in conflict with the second ontological thesis of simple realism. Austere realism denies, whereas simple realism affirms, that the right ontology includes numerous posits of both nonscientific and scientific thought and discourse—numerous entities that simple realism says are *real parts* of the whole cosmos.

When common sense goes ontologically reflective, its posits initially appear to be ontological commitments. This means that cats, cups, and stones appear to it as among what is ultimately real—as items in the correct ontology. Likewise, the posits of science appear to be ontological commitments. This means again that whatever completed physics claims to exist—atoms, quarks, strings, or waves—are also part of the correct ontology.

These ontological claims of simple realism are obviously in sharp conflict with the ontological theses of austere realism and of blobjectivism. Austere realism, as we shall explain, claims that the right ontology excludes virtually all the concrete particular posits of everyday thought and discourse—including cats, cups, and stones. Blobjectivism claims that there really is just one concrete individual—the entire cosmos—and that it does not

have any real parts. Simple realism, however, holds that vastly many parts are real in an ultimate ontological manner. Bobjectivism also claims that the cosmos exhibits rich structural complexity and spatiotemporal local variability, despite lacking any genuinely real parts. Simple realism, however, construes structural complexity in terms of distinct parts and their various relations to one another.

On the semantic side, there is no conflict concerning the idea that truth is correspondence between discourse/thought and the world; both simple realism and austere realism affirm this, in their respective first semantic theses. But simple realism does not recognize any distinction between direct and indirect correspondence—a distinction that we will discuss at some length later in the book. Instead, simple realism construes truth as a direct mapping between language/truth and reality, a mapping that requires the posits of true thoughts/statements to be items in the correct ontology.

Austere realism, on the other hand, holds that numerous statements (and the thought-contents they express) are not really ontologically committed to their posits—that is, are not ontologically committed to individuals in the mind-independent world answering to the names, definite descriptions, and existential quantifications employed in these statements, and are not ontologically committed to properties and relations answering to the predicates employed in these statements. Austere realism holds that although the nature of the mind-independent world is indeed the basis for the truth of these statements (and the truth of the thoughts they express), truth is typically an indirect relation rather than the kind of ontology-implicating mapping that constitutes direct correspondence. More on this as the book unfolds.